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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RABAT 000728

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DEPT FOR NEA/MAG

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TAGS: [ECON](#) [MO](#) [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH ARAB MAGHREB UNION SECRETARY
GENERAL BEN YAHIA

REF: A. STATE 59571
[1](#)B. EWING-LENDERKING 4/19 EMAIL

Classified By: Pol/C Timothy Lenderking for reasons 1.4 (b),(d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Ambassador met April 19 with Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) Secretary General Habib Ben Yahia to discuss the AMU's role in regional integration, the Western Sahara, counterterrorism and human rights. Ben Yahia explained that the AMU works well at the ministerial and technical levels when the five member countries focus on such cross-cutting issues as health, education, finance and infrastructure development. At the "political" level, the fact that a summit has not been held since 1994 posed an obstacle, but did not prevent the AMU from continuing its work. Ben Yahia described member states as increasingly understanding the need for collective action against collective threats such as terrorism, illegal immigration and desertification. Their budgetary contributions also reflect their support for the integration process. He said that the issue of the Western Sahara was best dealt with by the UN, but that the continued contact and cooperation between Morocco and Algeria on issues of common concern could eventually serve to "diminish" differences between the two countries. Despite its seeming distance from the other AMU member countries, Mauritania is fully engaged in the regional integration process. Ben Yahia described AMU efforts to hold an Interior Ministers' meeting later this year and to establish a commission dealing with civil society and human rights issues. Throughout the meeting, Ben Yahia repeatedly urged U.S. support to promote the regional integration process and pledged to be in close contact with the Mission during his tenure as SYG. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador met April 19 for one hour with newly appointed Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) Secretary General Habib Ben Yahia to discuss the AMU's role in regional integration, at Ben Yahia's request. Ambassador congratulated Ben Yahia on his posting and delivered ref a congratulatory letter from Secretary Rice. Ben Yahia explained that his appointment in

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February follows a ten-year stint as Tunisian Foreign Minister and two years as special advisor to President Ben Ali. He described his mission as working to enhance regional integration, with a particular focus on issues of common concern to the five member countries. He explained the

ongoing "grassroots integration process" which consists of 10 to 15 annual meetings at a technical or ministerial level on such issues as: desertification, water, health (including avian flu), and the harmonization of educational systems. At this level, Ben Yahia said, the AMU is doing a "fine job." However, while he said that the Western Sahara is not on his agenda, he said he feels the "obstacle of it" on the AMU process at a more political level.

AMU Works at a Certain Level

13. (C) Ben Yahia noted that he had met with Moroccan Prime Minister Jettou earlier in the day and that the GOM seemed well disposed to further regional integration. He plans to visit Algeria next month to try to "get momentum going." Instead of focusing on the Western Sahara issue, however, Ben Yahia said he would try to emphasize the common interests of the five countries. Unfortunately, the closed borders between Algeria and Morocco diminish AMU efforts regarding trade, communications and shared infrastructure such as autoroutes. On the technical and ministerial level, however, progress continues to be made. While a summit has not been held since 1994, foreign ministers continue to meet at least twice annually and other ministers (for example, Trade, Transportation, and Finance) and technical experts meet on an ad hoc basis. For example, last month's Finance Ministers' meeting in Tunisia resulted in the establishment of the Maghreb Bank which will be operational by early next year. Other examples of technical cooperation include the ongoing construction of an inter-Maghreb highway system, an already functioning shared electricity system, and a proposal for a trans-Maghreb rapid train connection currently being studied. Ben Yahia said that his vision is to work on "building confidence with small steps," but emphasized that we "need some pushing from friends such as the US and the EU" to get

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the five countries to do more for regional integration. Ben Yahia said repeatedly that he hoped that his "friends in Washington would pay some attention to these issues."

14. (C) Ben Yahia explained that the economic advantages of integration may prove the most persuasive. According to Ben Yahia, economic studies indicate that if Maghreb integration succeeds, each country will add two points to their economic growth rates and the amount of exports from each country to other Maghreb countries will be multiplied tenfold. Ben Yahia said he has detected a new disposition to accelerate the integration process based on a growing awareness and understanding of the economic benefits involved. The AMU, however, continues to need an external push. In this regard, A/S Welch's and former A/S Burns's statements during their visits to the region emphasizing the importance of the integration process had been very helpful. The Ambassador agreed that, as in Morocco, regional economic development and growth are essential. When you consider the five countries involved, they form a good marketplace due to the complementarity of goods and services they can each provide.

In addition, the creation of that market will also attract foreign investment, another means for generating growth and creating employment.

15. (C) Apart from the economic benefits, member countries had also begun to recognize a need for collective action on other key issues, according to Ben Yahia. For example, Nouakchott had recently hosted a Commission to discuss desertification. When the five member countries saw weekly satellite photos of the desert creep, they committed to study common measures necessary to counter this phenomena. While this particular meeting had been singularly focused, Ben Yahia described a "new kind of awareness" amongst the members that such issues as terrorism, security, illegal migration, locusts, and avian flu must also be collectively dealt with in order to put a stop to them. The Ambassador told Ben Yahia that the US had been very active in the locust situation last year and had found good cooperation from Mali and Mauritania.

Western Sahara Belongs to the UN

¶6. (C) In response to Ambassador's query regarding the AMU's role in the Western Sahara, Ben Yahia said that the Western Sahara issue should be left to the UN, which could be more proactive. That said, the longer that Algeria and Morocco work together under the AMU umbrella on other issues, the less impact the Western Sahara issue will have. In Ben Yahia's "modest" experience thus far with the AMU, the issue of the Western Sahara never arises in the commissions discussing such cross-border issues as avian flu, water, and desertification. While King Mohammed's autonomy proposal may resolve the situation in the long run, the AMU must continue in the meantime to work on common problems of security, instability, immigration, poverty, unemployment, and terrorism. If the US and EU could increase their emphasis on bolstering the regional integration process, Ben Yahia said, the Western Sahara issue could perhaps be "diluted little by little" over time.

Mauritania a Full Player

¶7. (C) In response to Ambassador's question, Ben Yahia said that Mauritania was fully participating in the AMU and committed to the regional integration process. In particular, with the discovery of oil, the government of Mauritania is keen on becoming part of the Maghreb energy network. While Mauritania faces both sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb, both the former and current leaders are eager to have better connections with the Maghreb because it will promote economic development. Although Mauritania is "far away," the new "President" is deeply involved in the integration process because he has big challenges to meet domestically in both the democratizing and the development process.

Counterterrorism Cooperation

¶8. (C) The Ambassador noted that the U.S. has an interest in bolstering capacity in the Maghreb countries to fight

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terrorism and emphasized that the AMU could play an important role in such issues. Ben Yahia explained that the Security Commission for Ministers of Interior had not held a meeting since 1994 because of the problems between Morocco and Algeria. However, the AMU would host a meeting of experts from the five Ministries of Interior next month to prepare for a meeting of Interior Ministers later this year.

New Civil Society Commission

¶9. (C) In response to Ambassador's query on AMU involvement in social issues and human rights, Ben Yahia explained that the Union has special commissions on women's emancipation and the harmonization of the educational systems. Recently he hosted a meeting on the formation of a joint NGO civil society commission to deal specifically with human rights and other social issues. The group will meet next in August in Tunis to establish an organization to create chapters in each country.

No Budget Issues

¶10. (C) Responding to the Ambassador, Ben Yahia noted that the AMU now has five institutions: the Secretariat in Rabat, the Maghreb Parliament in Algiers, the Judicial Court in Nouakchott, a university in Tripoli and the Maghreb Bank for Investment and Trade in Tunis. The budget of each of these institutions is shared equally by the five member countries. The Secretariat, for example, requires approximately USD 3-4 million annually for expenditures, including hosting meetings. According to Ben Yahia, the organization is actually "well-provided" with funding which demonstrates the will of the five member states to support the regional

integration process.

U.S. Assistance Requested

¶11. (C) Ben Yahia reiterated his request that the U.S. help support the regional integration process numerous times throughout the meeting and pledged to be in close contact with the U.S. Mission during his tenure in Rabat.

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